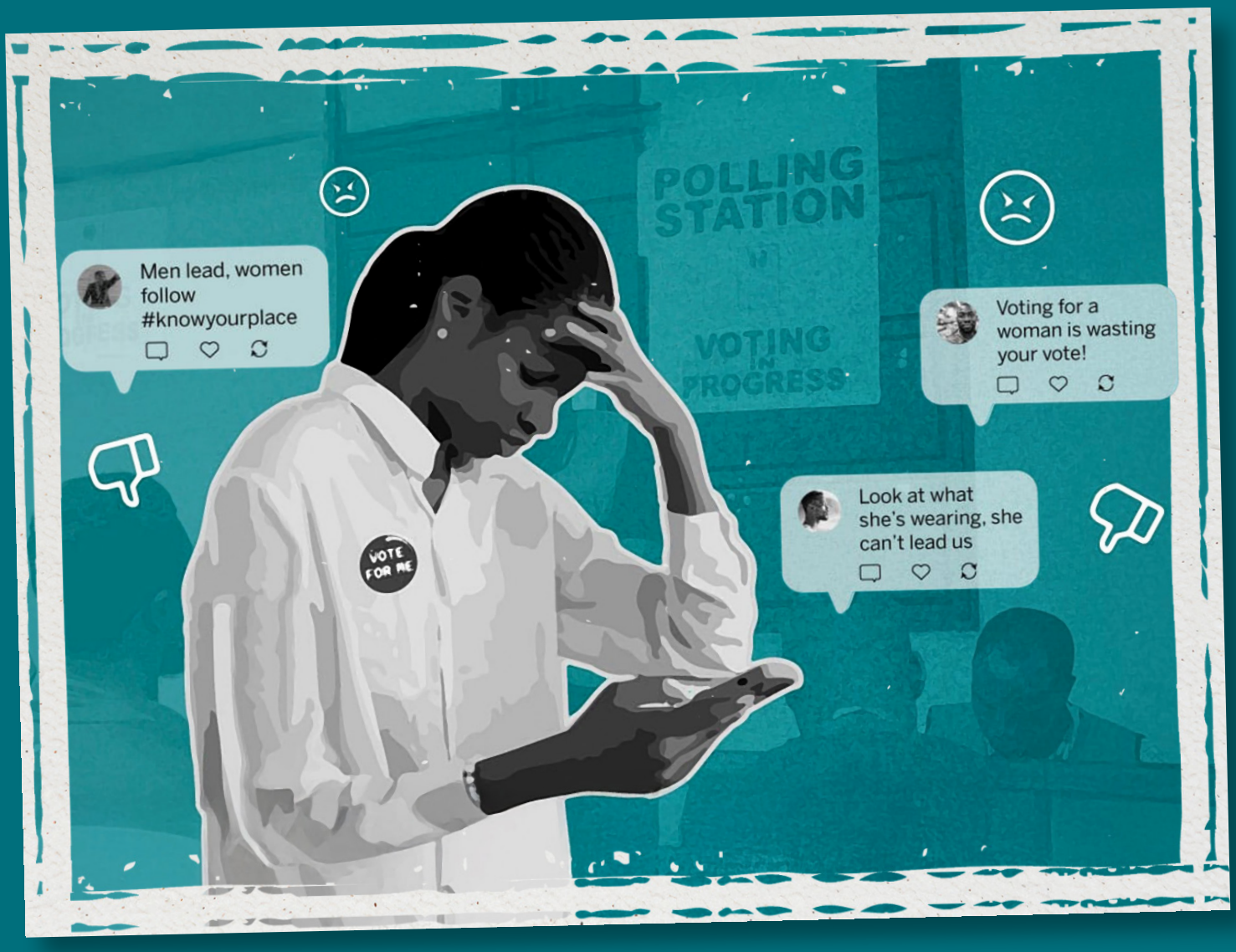
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Digital Violence and Political Intimidation: Addressing Online Violence Against Women in Local Politics in Zimbabwe

Shingirai Mtero, Gibson Ncube & Mandiedza Parichi



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Executive Summary

Violence against women and girls has intensified in the digital age, with online platforms increasingly weaponised to stalk, harass, and threaten women in politics. Accelerated by advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI), anonymous accounts, and inadequate legal frameworks, online violence has emerged as a critical frontier for anti-democratic actors seeking to push women out of public life. While global data underscores this deepening challenge, existing research routinely prioritizes national-level politics, neglecting the experiences of women in local government politics. This report addresses this critical gap by examining the nature, form, and impact of online violence against women in local government politics in Zimbabwe. Classified as 'not free' by Freedom House and burdened by a history of political intimidation, Zimbabwe has seen a decline in women's political representation despite established gender quotas. At the local government level, the layer of leadership most accessible to the community, online violence is highly insidious. Digital platforms and messaging applications, particularly WhatsApp, are routinely used to subject female local leaders to death threats, digital surveillance, and disinformation. Evidence shows that these online threats frequently escalate into offline physical attacks. This study draws on survey data and key informant interviews conducted with elected councillors and local government leaders from six Local Government Authorities in Zimbabwe. The report provides context-specific knowledge and actionable recommendations for civil society, political parties, and women in politics. It also proposes legal reforms to ensure more effective mitigation and prevention of online violence. The increased regulation of online spaces is central to safeguarding women's democratic participation.

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We extend our sincere gratitude to the Zimbabwean elected local government officials and community leaders who provided their insights and perspectives for this research project. We are also grateful to Ms Sitabile Dewa, Ms Jessie Chihota, and the team at the Women's Academy for Leadership and Political Excellence (WALPE) for their invaluable assistance during the research process. Additionally, we would like to thank Dr. Emmanuel Orkoh, Ms. Julia Falkerby, Ms. Susanne Hagström and Prof. Eleanor Fisher from the Nordic Africa Institute for their support in the successful completion of this research project. Lastly, we would like to thank the reviewers and ICLD for their valuable inputs in completing this report.

Preface



By Johan Lilja, Secretary General, Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is committed to strengthening local democracy and promoting sustainable development by supporting knowledge exchange, capacity-building, and municipal partnerships. Our research programme plays an important role in this mission, generating evidence and practical tools that can help local governments advance inclusive and participatory governance.

This report has been produced in conjunction with ICLD's Knowledge Centre and is the 38th report to be published in ICLD's Research Reports series. It is a result of the research project that was financed by ICLD in the spring of 2025, following the call for proposals *From local to global – challenges and opportunities for local democracy in times of crisis.*

This research looks at what happens when a woman in local politics picks up her phone. In Zimbabwe, WhatsApp is the backbone of local politics and while it is used to report leaking water pipes and interact with the councillors, it is also used to threaten, shame and silence women. After surveying 76 representatives and conducting 14 in-depth interviews the researchers found that women were more than three times as likely to be targeted by disinformation, and 40 percent had experienced online sexual harassment. Moreover, a third of the women said that threats that began online escalated into physical attacks.

The closer politics is to people, the more personal the violence becomes. Abuse comes from neighbours and community groups, and it reaches women's children and families. Laws exist on paper, yet the more pressing question is how to implement and apply them in practice.

This research report highlights that online violence against women in politics is a direct threat to local democracy and why this needs to be acted upon. Every woman who withdraws, or decides not to run, weakens the representation citizens are entitled to. Laws must be enforced, parties must answer for their supporters, and women need real protection. I thank the researchers and, above all, the women who shared their experiences. I hope this report moves local governments, parties and civil society to act.

Visby, Sweden



Johan Lilja,
Secretary General, ICLD
September 2026

About the authors



Dr Shingirai Mtero is a cross-disciplinary scholar whose research areas include: Gender Studies, African Feminism(s) & Transitional Justice. She is currently conducting research on barriers to women's political participation and gendered political violence in Africa at the Nordic Africa Institute. Mtero holds a PhD in Political & International Studies from the Department of Political and International Studies at Rhodes University (South Africa) where she also served as a Lecturer. Mtero has served on the Knowledge Network of the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa and serves as an editor for the Nordic Journal of African Studies.



Dr Gibson Ncube's work lies at the intersection of gender and cultural studies in Africa. In 2025/26, he was the Mzee Suleimann Nyembwe Visiting Professor and Chair of African and Diasporic Literary and Cultural Studies at Eberhard Karl University of Tübingen. He is a senior lecturer at Stellenbosch University. He serves on the Editorial Boards of numerous journals, including the *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* and the *Canadian Journal of African Studies*. He has widely published on women in politics in Zimbabwe. He has held fellowships at institutions that include Oxford University, Leeds University, the National Humanities Center (USA) and the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study.



Dr. Mandiedza Parichi is a Zimbabwean academic and gender specialist based at the Department of Peace and Security Studies at Midlands State University. Dr Parichi has over 15 years of experience in gender-based violence (GBV) prevention, women's rights and peacebuilding. She served as a Researcher on the EU Horizon 2020 STEAMBio-Africa Project in Windhoek, Namibia and has conducted extensive research on violence against women in politics and Women, Peace and Security. Her expertise includes designing and implementing GBV prevention programmes, with an emphasis on conflict-related GBV. She has served as a gender-responsive governance specialist for several UN agencies and the African Union.

Introduction

"Violence against women and girls is a global scourge. And in our digital age, it is being amplified by the reach and speed of technology…Online harassment, deepfakes and hate speech are proliferating and misogynistic content is moving from the margins to the mainstream."

- United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres (Official statement for the 2025 International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women)

In 2025, the #16DaysofActivism global campaign, themed "UNiTE to End Digital Violence against All Women and Girls", highlighted the grave danger digital spaces pose to women and girls, noting that digital violence is the fastest-growing form of abuse against them. The UN Secretary-General emphasises that this threat requires urgent global attention: "we cannot allow digital spaces to be yet another place where women and girls are unsafe".

Online platforms, designed for communication and connectivity, have become conduits of gendered harassment and violence. Data shows that these platforms are increasingly being used to stalk, harass, and threaten women, particularly women in politics who face death threats, hate speech, and disinformation. Elected and aspiring women leaders face targeted harassment, including threats of violence and sharing of manipulated images aimed at tarnishing their reputations, reducing their agency, and forcing them out of politics. This violence is compounding - it not only violates the rights of the individual woman, but it also sends a signal to other women to stay out of politics. This negatively affects representative democracy, gender equality and undermines the principles of democratic plurality.

Data from Europe, Latin America and Africa show that the online space has become increasingly hostile to women politicians and poses a "deepening challenge to democracy" (NDI, 2024). Research conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has found that online violence is the most prevalent form of violence being reported by women politicians (NDI, 2019). Advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools allow malicious actors to generate fake images, manipulate social media algorithms, and increase negative sentiments or incite violence against women leaders. The proliferation of anonymous ghost accounts has led social media platforms such as Facebook, X and TikTok to admit that they do not have sufficient capacity to control or police all users on their platforms. In addition, many governments lack the legal frameworks to prosecute online harassment beyond the scope of sexual harassment or defamation. As such, online violence against women in politics has emerged as the new frontier for anti-democratic and patriarchal political actors who intend to stifle democratic discourse and to push politically active women out of politics.

This study focuses on online violence against women in local politics in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is the only democratic country in Southern Africa categorised as 'not free' by Freedom House (Freedom House, 2026).[1] The country has a history of post-election violence and state-led intimidation of political opponents. Though the country employs a legal gender quota for parliament and local government seats, it has recorded a slow decline in women's representation in the last two election cycles (Mtero et al., 2023). In the run-up to the 2023 elections, the African Union's Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa, cautioned the Zimbabwean government to respond more decisively to targeted attacks aimed at women politicians. She stated that she was concerned by reports of "escalating political tension and incidents that have resulted in offline and online attacks targeting voters and members of political parties, with a particular focus on women" (AU, 2023). Post-election interviews conducted with women politicians in Zimbabwe revealed an escalation in online abuse of women during the election period (Madsen & Mtero, 2023; Mtero et al., 2023).

1 Eswatini is also classified as 'Not Free' by Freedom House. Eswatini is not a democratic state; it is an absolute monarchy with limited constitutional provisions.

Research on barriers to women's political participation and violence against women in politics in Zimbabwe has primarily focused on women in national politics, neglecting the experiences of women at the local government level (Bhatasara & Chiweshe, 2021; Gudhlanga, 2013; Makonese, 2021; Maphosa et al., 2015; Ncube, 2020; Ncube & Yemurai, 2020; Sisimayi et al., 2026; Zigomo, 2022). This report will demonstrate that digital platforms and mobile applications are being used to target elected and aspiring women in local government leadership. The modalities and manifestations of online violence at the local level are less visible and thus more insidious. Applications like WhatsApp are being used to target women in local politics, subjecting them to death threats, sexual harassment, digital surveillance, and disinformation campaigns. This report will also show that threats of violence that originate in the online space escalate to physical attacks, abductions, and sexual assault.

This study addresses a gap in current research and policy on violence against women in politics. It focuses on a category of political actors that are often neglected in policy discourse: women in local government politics. Studies that address violence against women in politics should include a focus on how violence manifests in local government systems, as this is the level of government most intertwined with the community. Not only are local governments responsible for immediate service delivery, but they are the level of leadership most accessible to the electorate. Violence against political actors at the local level has adverse effects on democracy; it weakens governance structures and hollows out the substance of representative politics. Understanding how violence manifests at the local level is also necessary for effective policy responses. As politics is context-specific, so too is political violence. As this study will show, local contexts inform how online violence against women manifests. They also inform which digital platforms are used and especially how they are weaponised. Though online violence is a global phenomenon, it manifests in local contexts through complex local networks. Conducting research at the local level brings these complexities to the fore and provides the relevant actors with context-specific knowledge needed to develop evidence-based solutions to this global challenge.

The central aim of the research project that this report is based on was to understand the nature, form and impact of online violence against women in local government politics in Zimbabwe and provide recommendations to local governments, local women politicians and other key front-line local actors to address online violence.

This report provides an analysis of the nature, forms, and impact of online violence against women in local government politics in Zimbabwe, with particular attention to the legal environment governing such violence. Conceptually, the study makes use of Krook's (2022) notion of semiotic violence to frame the nature and impact of online violence. It draws on African feminist approaches of intersectionality to account for the overlapping structures of power and discrimination that drive and normalise specific forms of gendered violence in Africa (Chirawu, 2023; Nkealah, 2025; Nyabola, 2024). The study draws on survey data and key informant interviews conducted with elected councillors and political candidates from six local government authorities in Zimbabwe. Alongside documenting women's experiences of online violence, the report examines the extent to which Zimbabwe's existing laws and regulations provide protection against such violence. It also identifies gaps and limitations in the current legal framework, and assesses the challenges associated with legal redress and enforcement. The report therefore offers recommendations for the adaptation of existing laws and regulations in Zimbabwe to strengthen the prevention, protection, and prosecution of online violence against women in politics. The report also recommends strategies that civil society organisations and political parties can employ to support women in local government who are targeted by online violence.[2]

2 The findings of from this project will also be packaged into and evidence-based toolkit for women in local politics and local government authorities to address online violence against women in politics

Violence Against Women in Politics

This section analyses the study's theoretical framework, beginning with an overview of the core concepts informing the study of Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWIP). It then analyses the nature and impact of online violence against women politicians, situating online violence as a form of semiotic violence, drawing on Krook's (2022) framework. Examples will primarily be drawn from Zimbabwe, supplemented by cases from other regions to demonstrate the global scope of this challenge.

The study of VAWIP is an expanding field of research, emerging from more focused efforts from scholars of gender and political science to analyse the gendered dimensions of political violence globally. The study of VAWIP is situated at the intersection of feminist studies, gender studies and political violence studies. Mona Lena Krook, a pioneer in the study of VAWIP, defines it as the study of all forms of aggression, coercion and intimidation designed to exclude women from politics solely due to their gender (Krook, 2017). Krook (2017) argues that intimidation, harassment and physical violence against women politicians should not be seen as 'simply the cost of doing politics' but rather a significant threat to democracy and women's civil liberties. Kuperberg (2018) defines VAWIP as all acts or threats of violence resulting in physical, psychological, or symbolic harm or suffering to women involved in, or associated with, politics. This definition extends beyond physical attacks, recognising the complex nature of VAWIP and its various manifestations. Women in politics face physical attacks and discursive violence, such as disinformation campaigns targeting their personal lives, physical appearance or character. Examples include online attacks against prominent political figures such as Jacinda Ardern (former prime minister of New Zealand), Michelle Obama (former US first lady), Jess Asato (UK Labour Party MP) and Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan (Nigerian member of National Assembly).

To distinguish generalised political violence from VAWIP, Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo (2020) emphasise the importance of demonstrating *how* political violence is gendered. This distinction is necessary to deepen the study of VAWIP, guiding more effective policy responses. They propose a framework that differentiates VAWIP from general political violence by focusing on three factors: gendered motives, gendered forms and gendered impacts. *Gendered motives* involve using violence to preserve male hegemony and control over a political system. Here, violence is not used to simply impede political opposition; instead, violence is used to impede the devolution of political power to women, and other non-hegemonic groups such as gay and trans men, rather than simply obstructing political opposition (Bardall et al., 2020). *Gendered forms* address how men and women experience and perpetrate political violence. While both groups face violence to inhibit political participation, women are more likely to experience sexual violence (Bardall, 2011; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2023). Women also more frequently receive threats or abuse rooted in negative gendered beliefs and prejudicial attitudes, as seen in the attacks targeted against Sanna Marin (former Prime Minister of Finland) and Kamala Harris (former US Vice President). Finally, *gendered impacts* refer to how different groups interpret political violence (Bardall et al., 2020). VAWIP has a gendered impact, predominantly driving women out of politics and discouraging other women from participating in politics.

VAWIP is a specific "phenomenon involving a range of harms to attack and undermine women as political actors (…) and exclude them as a group from public life" (Krook, 2020). While this framing may be novel in political science, historically efforts to impede women from running for political office are not new. Patriarchal beliefs and gendered norms that dominate private and public domains have long maintained that political leadership is the preserve of men. Governments, international agencies and gender equality activists have significantly invested in increasing women's representation, introducing quotas and incentivising women's inclusion in political institutions. These efforts yielded good results, with women's parliamentary seats rising globally from 11.3% in 1995 to 27.2% in 2025, with the most significant growth recorded between 2000-2015. However, this growth slowed significantly in 2025 and 2026, with 0.3% increases - the lowest since 2017 (IPU, 2025b, 2026). Scholars attribute this decline to a growing anti-gender movement or 'gender backlash' that seeks to reduce the rights of women, the LGBTQI community

and ethnic minorities. Violence, both physical and online, remains an effective weapon used by anti-gender political actors to maintain male dominance in political systems. Research shows that this violence aims to prevent women from participating freely in politics, to limit the political agency of women leaders, to create an unsafe political environment for women politicians and to reduce the pool of women willing to compete in elections (Bardall, 2011; Bardall et al., 2020; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2023; Krook, 2017, 2020; Krook & Sanín, 2016, 2020; OSCE, 2022; Piscopo, 2016; Sanín, 2022). This violence targets different categories of politically active women, including elected officials, officeholders, candidates, aspiring politicians, activists, and their supporters, families, communities and staff. VAWIP has a compounding effect, impacting the individual woman and signalling to women in general to avoid politics.

Online violence against women in politics: The new frontier

A 2016 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) report, entitled *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians*, surveyed women parliamentarians from 39 nations. It found that 21.8% had experienced sexual violence, 25.5% were victims of physical violence, 32.7% experienced economic violence and 81.8% experienced psychological violence. Psychological violence was the most prevalent, with just under half of these women reporting threats of rape, abduction and death, while serving (IPU, 2016). More recent European reports show low prevalence of physical and economic violence at 4 % and 12% respectively. However, 71% of women politicians surveyed reported experiencing psychological violence, with 41% receiving threats exclusively through online platforms (EPRS, 2024). A 2021 study conducted by the IPU on sexism and harassment against women parliamentarians in Africa interviewed 137 female parliamentarians from 50 countries. Of the women interviewed, 42% reported receiving threats of death, rape, beating, or abduction, primarily through social media (IPU, 2021). A more recent IPU report on 150 women parliamentarians from 33 countries in the Asia Pacific region found that 60% were subjected to online hate speech, disinformation campaigns, image-based abuse, and disclosure of personal information that compromised their physical safety(IPU, 2025a).

Data from Europe, North America, and Latin America reflect similar trends. A multi-country study on toxic political messaging in the United States, Denmark, Belgium, and Chile found that online attacks impose a double burden on women and expose them to higher levels of toxicity. Although political attacks during election campaigns are often intended to discredit, intimidate, or undermine opponents regardless of gender, attacks against women politicians can take on a specifically gendered character. This distinction is important in that such attacks draw on sexist stereotypes, question women's competence as political actors, target their bodies, sexuality or gender roles. These attacks often assert that women lack the legitimacy to be political leaders and seek to reinforce their exclusion from political spaces. Unlike attacks targeting male politicians, those aimed at women parliamentarians were designed to push them out of office (Eady & Ramussen, 2024). In a 2020 report from Finland, it was found that female Finnish ministers received a disproportionate number of abusive messages, a large proportion of which contained both latent and overtly sexist and sexually explicit language (EPRS, 2024). Another study surveying 287 Swedish members of parliament found that while women MPs did not experience more frequent online abuse compared to men, they were subjected to more sexualised attacks and forms of gendered harassment focusing on factors such as physical appearance and sexual history (Erikson et al., 2023). The importance of these findings, thus, lies in identifying how gender intersects with political hostility. The issue, of course, is not simply that women experience more online abuse, but that the content, form, and effects of such abuse may reproduce gendered inequalities and undermine their political participation. This distinction informs the analysis of online violence against women throughout the present study.

Online violence against women in politics is the most prevalent form of violence faced by women in politics today, according to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) (NDI, 2024). Other institutions that monitor global democracy, such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the IPU have noted an exponential

increase in the use of digital platforms to attack, threaten, and harass women political leaders. These attacks escalate during election periods and times of political instability. As shown in the figure below, these online attacks include acts such as death threats and threats of other forms of physical assault, threats of sexual violence, rape and sexual harassment, gendered disinformation campaigns, spreading of images or videos generated by AI tools, stalking and doxing. Fear of online violence deters women with political aspirations from entering politics (NDI, 2019; OSCE, 2022). In numerous cases, online violence has led women to leave elective politics altogether. In October 2025, Anna-Karin Hatt, the leader of Sweden's Center Party, announced that she would be resigning and leaving public politics after serving in the position for only five months. Hatt, a career politician and former Minister of Energy stated that she had received so much online hate and threats that she no longer felt safe even in her own home (Höppner, 2025). The online space has become the new frontier for violence against women in politics. As shown in Figure 1 these attacks include a wide range of dangerous and intimidating acts such as death threats, digital surveillance and doxing. These challenges form a pervasive toxic baseline that ultimately force women out of politics. Anti-democratic actors seeking to preserve male dominance and secure political advantage are increasingly using digital platforms as weapons of intimidation to undermine women's political participation and push politically active women out of politics.

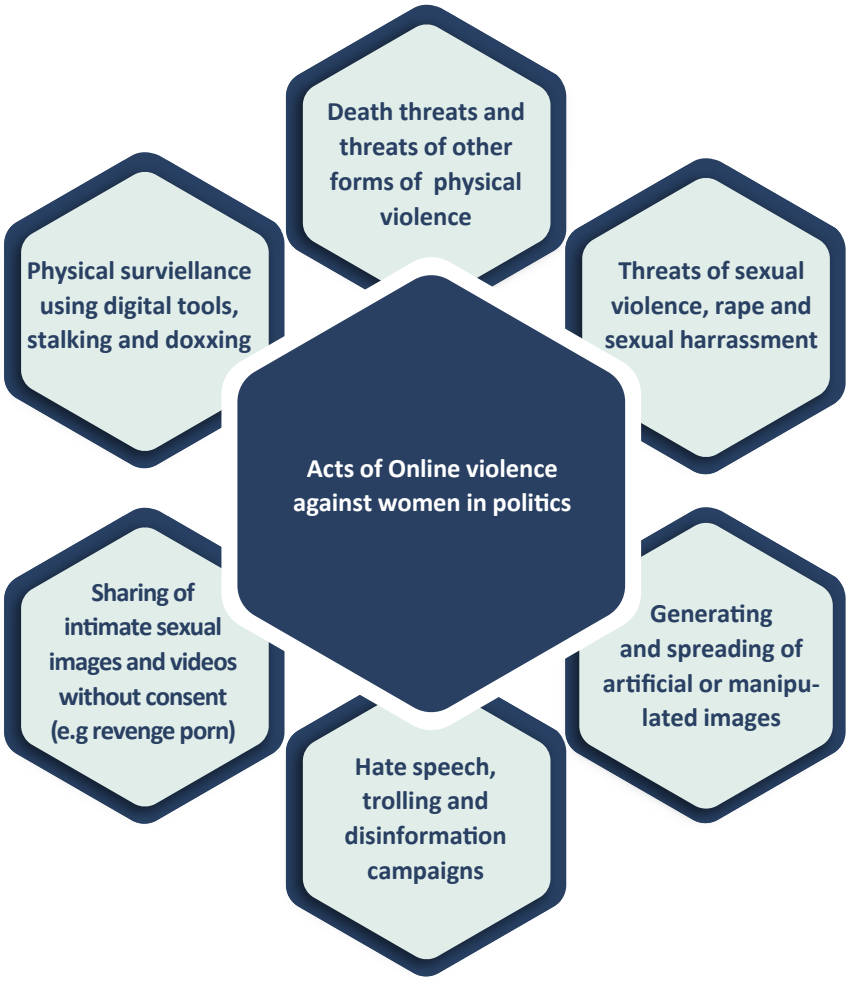


Figure 1: Acts of online violence against women in politics

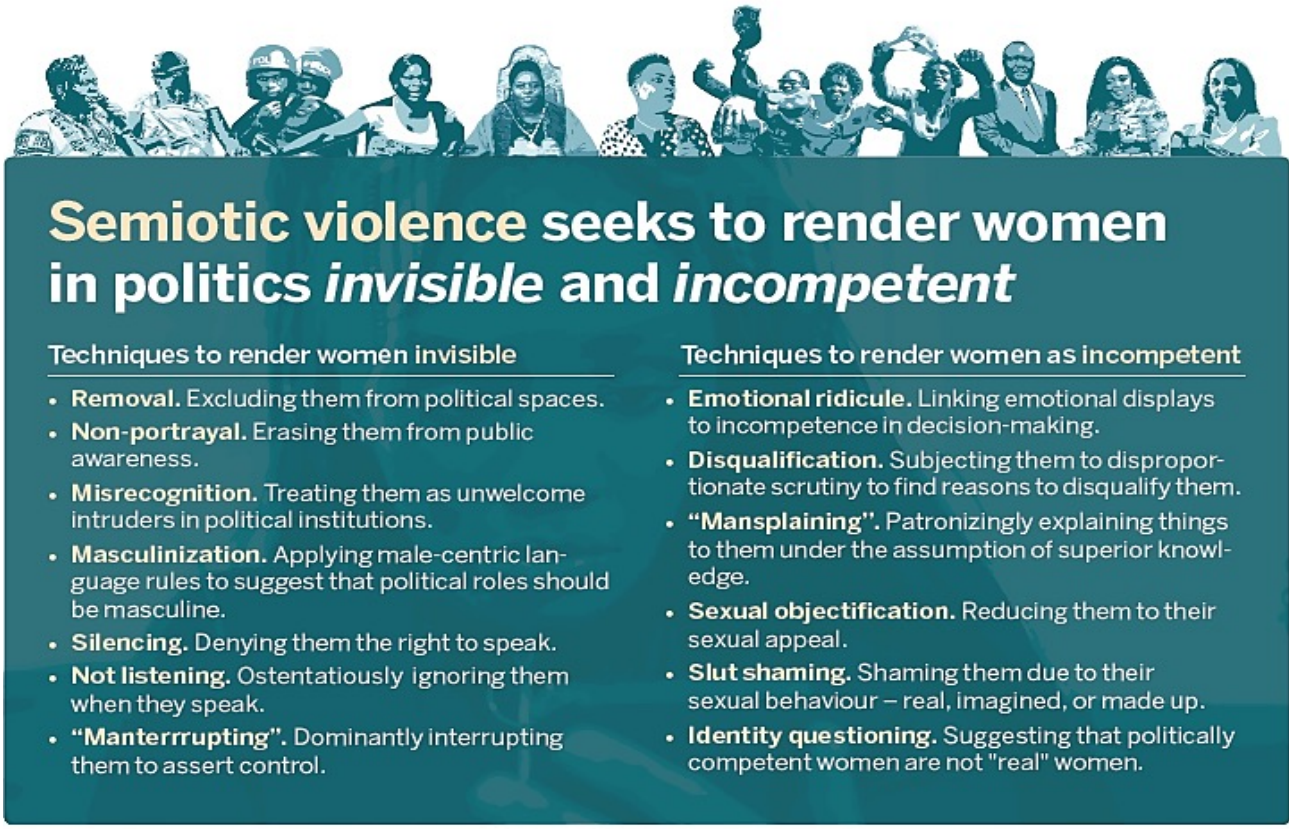
Zimbabwean presidential candidate, Linda Masarira, described social media as a 'dangerous space' for women in politics, where "misogynistic insults, abuse and harassment are used to denigrate and discipline women politicians" (Mtero, 2024). Three key features related to the Social Interaction Design (SxD) of social media platforms contribute to this danger. The first feature is 'anonymous user accounts' - anonymity allows perpetrators of gendered online violence to operate with impunity, as anonymous accounts are untraceable and undetectable. The second feature is the presence of 'automated accounts' or 'bot accounts' that are driven by algorithms rather than genuine human interaction. They are often grouped together into large networks and used to perform repetitive tasks, increase engagement and steer/manipulate public opinion. This has facilitated the creation of 'troll-farms' that spread disinformation, political propaganda and polarising views (Linvill & Warren, 2020). These troll farms launch coordinated attacks against female opponents, using manipulated sexual images, false information or gendered hate speech. Troll farm operators frequently create new accounts to avoid detection, making reporting very difficult. Lastly, AI tools with generative capacity have been integrated into social media user interface. Tools such as X's 'Grok', enable users to easily create artificial images, videos, and audio recordings which can be deployed to breed hostility, incite violence and spread disinformation in the digital space (Matsilele & Tshuma, 2025; Omanga et al., 2023; Tshuma & Matsilele, 2025). These tools are increasingly being used to generate sexual images, deepfake sexual videos, and disinformation about women political leaders. For example, in 2025, British Labour MP Jess Asato, was targeted with fake nude images and videos, including one depicting sexual assault, generated using Grok (Schmitz-Berndt et al., 2026).[3] The integration of generative AI into social media has significantly altered the scope, nature and impact of online violence against women in politics. While the UK and EU have introduced online safety laws that preside over the platform and the user, very few African states have effective legislation that criminalises acts of online violence.

Online violence as Semiotic Violence

Scholarship on VAWIP also explores its forms, motives, and impact (Bardall, 2020; Bjarnegård, 2021; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2023). The UN and other agencies categorise VAWIP into four main categories: physical, sexual, psychological, and economic (IPU, 2016; OSCE, 2022; UN, 2023). Physical violence involves the intentional use of force to cause injury, harm, or death, including murder, beatings, torture, arbitrary arrests, detention, and abduction. Sexual violence includes all forms of sexual assault, especially politically motivated rape as a tool of terror and intimidation. It also encompasses sexual harassment, groping, sexual insults and humiliation campaigns such as slut-shaming and revenge porn. Economic violence, in the context of political violence, refers to acts like damage to property, destruction of campaign materials, and denial of financial resources to restrict, exploit, manipulate, or coerce a political candidate. Psychological violence entails the use of non-physical forms of aggression to manipulate, control, silence and coerce a political candidate and influence political outcomes. This includes online and verbal harassment, threats, intimidation, blackmail, public ridicule, negative media portrayals and online disinformation campaigns (UN, 2023).

Krook (2022) argues for a fifth form of violence, "semiotic violence", suggesting that "physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence do not exhaust the spectrum of acts constituting violence against women in the political realm". Semiotic violence, refers to the use of semiotic resources, such as words, body language and images to injure, discipline, and subjugate women. Often dismissed as 'part of politics', this inconspicuous violence not only targets specific women but also shapes public perceptions of them, rendering them incompetent, unfit for leadership, or invisible in politics. By doing so, semiotic violence reinforces the notion that men are the only legitimate political actors.

3 Jess Asato has embarked on the first legal case in the UK against the company 'xAI' owned by Elon Musk. The case focuses on online safety, breaches of data protection law and misuse of her private information. Please see: https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/british-lawmaker-sues-musks-xai-over-sexualised-grok-images-2026-06-03/



Modified version of a model introduced by gender scholar Mona Lena Krook in *Violence against Women in Politics* (2020).

Figure 2: The character and impact of Semiotic Violence
(Source: https://nai.uu.se/stories-and-events/news/2023-12-13-patriarchal-politics-online-violence-and-silenced-voices.html)

Semiotic violence can target individual women or women as a social group, judging them unfit for political office. We argue that online violence against women in politics is a form of semiotic violence. Online attacks use gendered hate speech, manipulated images, misogyny and gendered disinformation to harm and delegitimise women in politics. Online discourse concerning Michelle Obama, Kamala Harris and Hillary Clinton serve as a key example of this form of violence. In 2009, searching Google for Michelle Obama initially displayed an image depicting her as a monkey. These images, created at the height of her husband's presidential campaign, aimed to dehumanise and silence her.[4] In 2016, Donald Trump and his supporters popularised the label 'Crooked Hillary' during the presidential campaign. This label, used in both print and online media, reinforced unfounded claims that Hillary Clinton was dishonest and engaged in criminal activities related to the use of a private email account.

In the most recent American election, online political commentators questioned Harris's femininity, noting her preference for wearing trousers over skirts. As Harris has no biological children, commentators also attacked her womanhood, sparking public discourse about her fertility, sexuality and family values. In all these examples, semiotic resources (images, narratives, words) rooted in patriarchal beliefs were used to delegitimise these women and portray them as incompetent and unfit for leadership.

In the African context, semiotic resources are also used to launch online attacks against women in politics. In Zimbabwe, in 2020, three opposition leaders - Joanah Mamombe, Cecilia Chimbiri and Netsai Marova - were allegedly abducted and sexually assaulted after an anti-government protest (Amnesty International, 2020). Police dismissed their claims and jailed the women for allegedly faking their own abductions. The women then faced a

4 Please see: Google apologises for offensive image of Michelle Obama. Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/20091125-2009-11-25-0910-international-press-review-michelle-obama-racist-image-google-curry-white-house-wine-hrw-torture-uk

coordinated online campaign attacking their credibility. Both 'X' and Facebook were flooded with images of the women in the company of different men, drinking, or at night events. Media articles depicted them as liars, promiscuous or mentally unstable. Semiotic resources effectively injured and silenced these women, leading one to leave politics and immigrate (Mtero et al., 2023). This example shows how online violence intersects with sexual, and psychological violence. Semiotic violence, however, better accounts for the nature of online violence experienced by women in politics, recognising that sexual images, AI-generated videos, or gendered disinformation campaigns can be weaponised to injure, harm and silence them. Krook's (2022) framework also accounts for the impact of online violence, noting that it causes women to withdraw or be forced out of politics, rendering them invisible, incompetent, and individually or collectively dehumanised and delegitimised.

As the Zimbabwean case will show, women in local politics are subjected to various forms of online violence. Semiotic resources are used to attack, malign, and push them out of politics. The next section will analyse Zimbabwe's political system and context for women's representation. Understanding the social, cultural, and political ecosystem that women in Zimbabwe operate within provides the necessary foundation to analyse the nature and impact of online violence experienced by women in local government politics.

Research Context

Case Study: Women's' political representation in Zimbabwe

Women's political participation in postcolonial Zimbabwe has been marked by persistent tension between constitutional commitments to gender equality and the realities of a political landscape structured by patriarchal power relations. Since independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has adopted legal and policy measures to enhance women's political representation and participation. However, despite these advances, women continue to encounter significant obstacles, including exclusionary party structures, economic marginalisation, gendered violence, and hostile digital environments (Bhatasara & Chiweshe, 2021; Sisimayi et al., 2026; Zigomo, 2022). As a result, numerical gains in representation have not translated into substantive political influence or the transformation of gendered power relations.

This contradiction can be traced to the early post-independence period. Although women played important roles in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, the transition to majority rule did little to disrupt the masculinist foundations of political leadership. In the first parliament after independence (1980), only 3 of 40 members in the House of Assembly were women, and only 9 of 100 parliamentary seats were held by women (Nehanda Centre for Gender and Cultural Studies, 2023). Similar statistics were evident in local government, where women constituted a negligible fraction of ward councillors (below 3%) and virtually no mayoral roles (Mandiyanike 2021). Political authority has remained concentrated within male-dominated liberation movements and party structures, relegating women to the margins of formal political decision-making (Maphosa et al., 2015; Parichi, 2021).

Reforms to remedy the underrepresentation of women in politics

In response to the continued underrepresentation of women, the Zimbabwean state introduced constitutional reforms intended to institutionalise gender equality and promote women's participation in public life. The 2013 Constitution was a significant milestone. Sections 17, 56, and 80 explicitly commit the state to gender equality, non-discrimination, and balanced representation in political and public institutions.

Legislated gender quotas were central to these reforms, increasing women's representation in elected office. The 2013 Constitution reserved sixty National Assembly seats exclusively for women, allocated through a proportional representation system based on provincial party votes (Mtero, 2025). This provision is not permanent; however, the quota was extended until 2028 via Constitution Amendment No. 2 of 2021, which also introduced a 30% quota for women in local government councils to strengthen women's grassroots participation. These measures yielded measurable gains in descriptive representation. Women's parliamentary representation rose from approximately 16% in 2008 to 34% by 2018. In 2018, women held only 13.3% (260 of 1958) of local government council seats (Gender Links, 2018). Following the 2021 quota introduction, women's representation in local government increased to 32% after the 2023 elections. These figures suggest quota systems can effectively correct historical imbalances. However, as the figure below shows, women's representation in Zimbabwe's parliament has begun to stagnate.

The limitations of quota-based interventions are increasingly evident. Zimbabwe's quota system has been described as "autocratic genderwashing" (Kronberg, 2025), where apparent gender inclusivity masks persistent patriarchal and authoritarian political practices (ZIMFACT, 2022). While quotas improve women's numerical presence, they have done little to

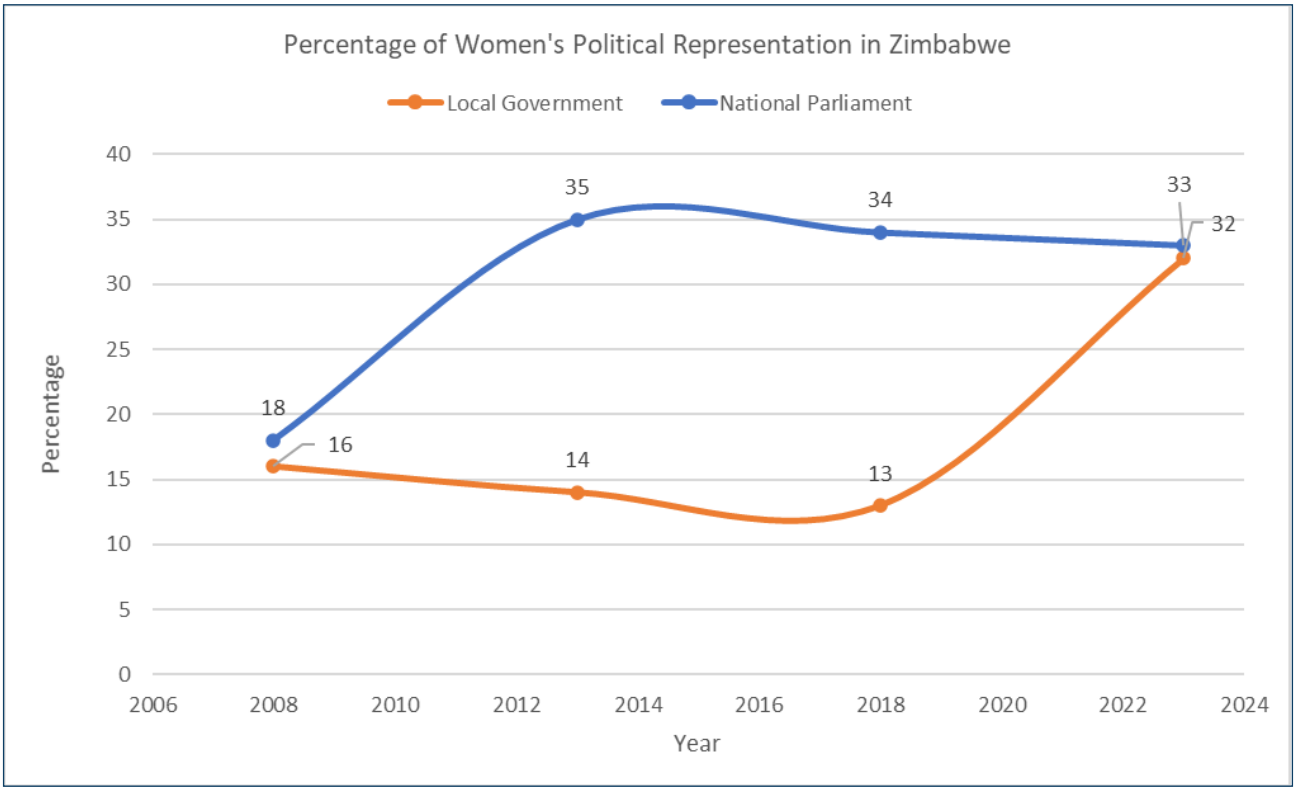


Figure 3: Percentage of Women's political representation in Zimbabwe's National Parliament (Upper & Lower House) and Local Government Authorities

challenge patriarchal cultures within political parties and decision-making processes. Women elected through the quota are often constrained and cannot exercise full political agency in their positions. This is because they enter political institutions through party appointments and not through direct elections. As a result, all their political choices must comply with party directives, even those that constrain women's advancement. If they do not comply, they risk being recalled and replaced by a more compliant candidate. Their limited agency also means they lack the institutional power to influence policy or transform gendered hierarchies (Chitando & Mlambo, 2024). Consequently, descriptive representation has not consistently translated into substantive representation.

The fragility of these gains was exposed during Zimbabwe's August 2023 harmonised elections. Despite quotas increasing women in reserved seats, their participation in direct First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral contests remains severely constrained. Political party regulation can provide an important institutional mechanism for addressing this imbalance by requiring parties to ensure greater gender diversity in their candidate lists, including through provisions that promote or mandate a mix of women and men among nominated candidates. Such regulatory measures can create opportunities for women to enter electoral contests that might otherwise remain dominated by male candidates. Female candidates continue to face significant financial barriers, unequal access to political networks, and exclusionary candidate selection processes controlled by party elites (Mtero et al., 2023). Zimbabwe's FPTP system exacerbates these challenges, as parties prioritise electorally viable candidates, a category still heavily gendered in favour of men (Sisimayi, 2024). The effectiveness of party-list regulation, however, depends on how such requirements interact with the electoral system and on whether parties are subject to meaningful enforcement mechanisms.

The 2023 elections revealed the extent of this structural exclusion: only 68 of 633 constituency-based parliamentary candidates (11%) were women (Mtero et al., 2023). Major political parties perpetuated these patterns of marginalisation, with ZANU-PF fielding only twenty-three women candidates, while the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) fielded twenty women (Mtero et al., 2023). Public discourse, dominated by the rivalry between President Emmerson Mnangagwa and opposition leader Nelson Chamisa reinforced "big men" politics, side-lining broader discussions on gender equality, democratic inclusion, and women's political participation ((Gouws & Madsen, 2025, Mtero et al., 2023).

Online Violence against women in politics in Zimbabwe

Violence, beyond institutional and electoral barriers, significantly constrains women's political participation in Zimbabwe. Historically, this included intimidation, physical assault, sexual violence, and forced displacement during elections. The rise of digital technologies and social media platforms has transformed the nature of political violence, creating new ways to discipline, silence, and exclude women from political life (Mangena, 2022; Ncube, 2020; Ncube & Yemurai, 2020).

Online violence against women in politics is a growing challenge in recent years. While digital platforms are important for political mobilisation, public debate, and civic participation, they also facilitate new forms of gendered harassment against women politicians, activists, journalists, and human rights defenders (Mare, 2023; Mutambasere, 2023). A 2023 *Afrobarometer* survey revealed that 75% of Zimbabweans support women's equal right to hold political office, yet 58% acknowledged that women seeking public office face significantly more harassment and abuse than men (Moyo-Nyede & Kugarakuripi, 2023). This highlights persistent gendered hostility despite strong formal support for women's political participation.

Digital violence against women politicians in Zimbabwe is often highly gendered. Opponents and online actors frequently target women's bodies, appearance, marital status, or perceived sexual morality instead of their policy positions (Ncube &

Yemurai, 2020). Sexualised trolling, body shaming, and misogynistic insults undermine women's credibility and divert attention from their political ideas and campaign promises. Doxxing and character assassination weaponise private information, rumours, or fabricated narratives to damage women's reputations. In a socially conservative context where women are judged by gendered moral expectations, such attacks can devastate political careers (Ncube, 2020; Zigomo, 2022) Digital anonymity further enables coordinated harassment by partisan actors, including organised troll networks like *Varakashi*, who use intimidation, disinformation, and threats of violence with limited accountability (Mutambasere, 2023).

Specific examples of online violence against women in politics

Several high-profile national-level women politicians illustrate the gendered dynamics of digital political violence in contemporary Zimbabwe.

Linda Masarira was the president of the Labour, Economists and African Democrats (LEAD) party. Her candidacy for the presidency was rejected by the electoral court in 2023. Until her death in May 2026, she experienced sustained online harassment characterised by colourism, misogyny, and attacks on her personal life. Public discussions of her political positions were frequently displaced by derogatory comments targeting her appearance, complexion, and marital history, reflecting broader attempts to delegitimise women who seek political authority (Mtero et al., 2023). Economic barriers compounded these challenges. Her inability to pay the US$20,000 presidential nomination fee in foreign currency, rather than in local Zimbabwean currency, effectively excluded her from the 2023 presidential election, demonstrating the intersection of financial exclusion and gender inequality in electoral politics.[5]



"Go take a bath!"

After a heated exchange on 'X', award winning journalist Hopewell Chin'ono stopped responding to Masaria's points and instead effectively told her to go and take a bath. This comment was based on previous interactions in which 'X' users attacked Masarira's physical appearance and dark skin tone. In a effort to humiliate her, trolls often told her to focus on fixing her appearance rather than politics

5 The US$20,000 presidential nomination fee was introduced through the Electoral (Nomination of Candidates) (Amendment) Regulations, 2022 (SI 144 of 2022), which increased the presidential nomination fee from US$1,000 to US$20,000. The fee was presented as part of the regulatory framework governing the nomination process, although its very substantial increase generated constitutional challenges concerning access to political participation. The Constitutional Court recorded concerns that the fee was potentially prohibitive for ordinary citizens seeking to contest the presidency. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission similarly observed during the 2023 elections that the US$20,000 presidential fee, or its Zimbabwe-dollar equivalent, was "steep" and limited some prospective candidates' ability to exercise their constitutional political rights. In Masarira's case, the difficulty was compounded by payment constraints: she reported that her banking transaction limit was insufficient to transfer the required amount electronically and that she could not afford to pay the fee in US dollars in cash. The requirement therefore illustrates how formally gender-neutral electoral regulations can have unequal consequences when access to substantial financial resources is itself gendered.

Fadzayi Mahere is a former member of parliament and an accomplished constitutional lawyer with degrees from the University of Zimbabwe and the University of Cambridge. Although her professional accomplishments are well known, she has been subjected to sustained campaigns of online harassment that combine misogynistic insults, personal attacks, and threats of violence. Mahere is not married and has no children. Online attacks often accuse her of being promiscuous or question her capacity as an adult for failing to secure a husband. These attacks diminish her public credibility while discouraging political participation by women more broadly.

Joanah Mamombe is an elected MP in Zimbabwe serving her second term. In 2018, she was the youngest person and woman to be elected to parliament. As noted above, in 2020, she was allegedly abducted and sexually assaulted for participating in an anti-government protest. Following the abduction and assault she became the target of extensive online disinformation campaigns that sought to discredit her testimony, undermine public sympathy, and shield state actors from accountability. Such incidents demonstrate how digital platforms increasingly function as extensions of broader systems of political repression and gendered violence.





Single = dangerous + incompetent

Although Mahere's professional qualifications are well known 'X' user @ CdeBhanan'ana accuses her of 'insurgency' and using sex to access a position in her party - effectively labelling her as a danger to the integrity of the party.
In another attempt to question her competence, X user @Mananabula2 states that Mahere's single status renders her unable to manage a political constituency. As she has not proven her capacity as a wife, she cannot be trusted to lead in any other capacity

"Faking an abduction"

Mamombe was hospitalised after she was allegedly abducted and sexually assaulted. Her medical records were leaked to The Herald, the state-run national newspaper. The paper published several articles that questioned her mental stability and declared her unfit for parliament. These articles were reposted on X and Facebook in a bid to discredit her assertion that she had been violently assaulted for her political views.

Sandra Ndebele is an elected local government councillor serving the City of Bulawayo. Ndebele is also a well-known actress and musical artist who rose to fame in the late 1990s. She is well known for her vibrant performances which draw on traditional Zimbabwean cultural dances. When Ndebele announced she was running for political office she faced significant sexual harassment that focused on her appearance, body shape and her career as a performing artist. Political commentators posted suggestive pictures of her on X, accompanied by captions containing sexual innuendos. Such posts would be filled with vulgar and sexually explicit comments and insults from X users.





"Magaro haatonge nyika"

Images of Ndebele's body were posted on X by a popular political commentary handle. These images that display her full body were chosen deliberately to invite sexualised and salacious commentary. The images were deployed as semiotic resources to delegitimise and dehumanise her.

In the responses to the tweet one X user implied that she was trying to use her body and sexual appeal to 'buy' votes. Warning others to not be manipulated by this tactic. Another X user implied that she had nothing else to offer the country besides her large buttocks. He quipped that buttocks could not be used to rule a country.

These responses display the normalisation of sexual harassment and objectification of women in Zimbabwean politics. Sexually explicit terms and insults are used to attack and humiliate women, while simultaneously questioning their capacity to lead.

These developments illustrate that challenges facing women in Zimbabwean politics extend beyond representation. Constitutional reforms and quotas have expanded women's visibility but haven't dismantled structural, cultural, and technological mechanisms that privilege male political authority. Online violence, a powerful contemporary instrument, polices women's public participation. By creating environments of intimidation, humiliation, and reputational risk, online abuse discourages women from entering or remaining in politics, reinforcing gender inequalities. Gender parity in Zimbabwe requires more than legislative reforms; it demands sustained efforts to transform party cultures, address economic barriers, combat political violence in physical and digital spaces, and challenge patriarchal norms shaping political citizenship in the postcolonial state.

Policy and legal regulations to protect women politicians

Zimbabwe has an ambitious legal framework to protect women in political life, spanning constitutional rights, electoral regulations, and specialised gender institutions. The 2013 Constitution guarantees gender parity, non-discrimination, and women's right to participate in elections free from intimidation (Sections 17, 56, 80). Domestic legislation reinforces these provisions; the Electoral Act prohibits gender-based discrimination and coercion during campaigns, requiring political parties to foster an inclusive environment conducive to the participation of all candidates. The Domestic Violence Act (2006), has been applied to intra- and inter-party gendered harassment due to its broad scope and definitions of violence and abuse. The Zimbabwe Gender Commission, established in 2013, is a constitutionally mandated body with powers to investigate and recommend the prosecution of gender-related violations, including violence against women in politics. These frameworks suggest a state that, on paper, prioritises the protection of female political actors.

With increased internet penetration, political violence has migrated to digital spaces. Zimbabwe's 2021 Cyber Security and Data Protection Act, extends formal legal protection to modern forms of abuse targeting women in public life. The Act criminalises cyberbullying and targeted harassment conducted via computer systems, carrying penalties of up to ten years' imprisonment. It explicitly prohibits the non-consensual distribution of intimate or fabricated sexual imagery, a common tactic to undermine women seeking political office. Section 164C of the Act criminalises transmitting false data intended to cause psychological or economic harm, offering a notional shield against online defamation and character assassination campaigns targeting women. However, the gap between statutory ambition and practical enforcement remains wide due to institutional inertia, resource constraints, and the politicisation of Zimbabwe's law enforcement apparatus. Laws are selectively applied, inadequately resourced, or subordinated to ruling-party interests, offering women politicians only the appearance of protection. This legal façade, in practice, does little to deter those with the will and political cover to harass, intimidate, or silence them.

Zimbabwe's layered legal framework offers little practical recourse or protection to women in politics due to deficient and compromised enforcement. Empirical studies and legal reviews (Zimbabwe Gender Commission, 2024) consistently demonstrate that the gap between statutory protection and real-world application is not incidental but structural, producing a climate of functional impunity for perpetrators of violence against women in politics.

For example, the Cyber Security and Data Protection Act, is rendered largely theoretical by the Zimbabwe Republic Police's lack of institutional capacity, The police do not have digital forensics capacity, specialist training, or the hardware required to trace anonymous troll networks or dismantle coordinated bot campaigns, the very instruments most commonly used against

female candidates online. Similarly, the Electoral Act's provisions against gendered intimidation are rarely activated by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission IZEC), which has shown little desire to disqualify male candidates or sanction political parties whose supporters engage in abuse against women running for public office. To further demonstrate the lack of political will within ZEC to address gendered hate speech, ZEC's own chairperson Justice Priscilla Chigumba was subjected to online hate speech and harassment in the aftermath of the 2018 and 2023 elections. ZEC has failed to sanction anyone for these attacks, further contributing to the normalisation of this violence.

Compounding this, the Cyber Security Act has been weaponised by state actors to suppress digital dissent and target opposition figures and protect the political elite, rather than to shield female politicians from malicious non-state harassment (Women's Academy for Leadership and Political Excellence (WALPE) / Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2024). This selective and politicised deployment of the law reveals the deeper problem: not an absence of legal tools, but an absence of institutional will to apply them impartially. Deep-seated patriarchy within state security agencies further ensures that gendered abuse is deprioritised, minimised, or not investigated at all. As a result, female politicians in Zimbabwe are functionally abandoned by the very legal framework ostensibly designed to protect them. They are left to navigate a hostile political environment without reliable or effective judicial or state protection.

It is also important to highlight that the issues discussed above are further compounded by the politicisation of Zimbabwe's state security apparatuses, including the police and other security agencies whose institutional mandates are formally grounded in the protection of citizens and the maintenance of public order. Over successive electoral cycles, these institutions have frequently been accused of operating within a highly partisan political environment, with security-sector actors implicated in the intimidation of opposition actors, journalists, civil society organisations, and political activists. This politicisation has particular consequences for women politicians because the same institutions that should investigate threats, harassment, and intimidation may themselves be perceived as politically aligned with those responsible for, or benefiting from, such abuses. The result is a profound asymmetry in access to protection: politically connected perpetrators can operate with relative impunity, while women who report abuse may face indifference, secondary victimisation, or further surveillance and intimidation. The politicisation of the security apparatus therefore transforms the problem from one of inadequate institutional capacity into one of institutional partiality. Where security institutions are themselves embedded in partisan political structures, legal protections against gendered political violence become difficult to activate precisely when they are most needed.

As noted in the introduction, research on online violence against women in politics in Zimbabwe has primarily focused on women in national politics. That is, women running for national assembly seats, women serving in parliament seats or occupying cabinet positions. The experiences of women in local government politics are under-studied. This study focused on online violence in local government politics. The following section outlines the methods the project employed to meet the aims of the study.

Methods

Research Questions and Methods

The research project that this report is based on focuses on the nature and impact of online violence against women in local politics in Zimbabwe. The project is guided by the following central research question: What strategies can local governments, local women politicians and other key front-line local actors use to effectively mitigate and prevent online violence against women in local politics in Zimbabwe? It is further guided by the following sub-questions:

- RQ1: What is the nature, form and impact of online violence against women in local government politics in Zimbabwe?
- RQ2: What laws and regulations can local government authorities mobilise to effectively mitigate and prevent online violence against women in local government politics in Zimbabwe?
- RQ 3: How can key front-line actors (e.g. civil society organisations, electoral commissions or political parties) strategically support local governments and women targeted by online violence?

The research project made use of a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods to address each research question and develop the toolkit.

The project ensured that it made use of research methods that were inductive, comparative and participatory, grounded in African feminist intersectional theory (Nkealah, 2025; Nyabola, 2024; Yacob-Haliso, 2025). The principles that inform the theory of intersectionality are particularly useful in the study of violence against women in politics as it acknowledges that systems of power, discrimination and hierarchy are interlaced and mutually reinforcing (Crenshaw, 1989, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2016). In this study, we pay particular attention to the importance of context, recognising that women politicians' experiences of violence are shaped by specific socio-cultural, historical and political environments. An intersectional approach therefore made it possible to examine how political violence targeting women is experienced differently across diverse contexts and locations, while remaining attentive to the ways in which local norms, power relations and institutional structures influence both the manifestation and impact of such violence.

The fieldwork and data collection for this project was conducted in two phases. The first phase was completed in October -November 2025 and the second phase in April 2026. The project made use of both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods which included conducting surveys, key informant interviews and review of legal policy and regulations.

Surveys: the project administered surveys to local government councillors and leaders from six local government authorities in Zimbabwe. Namely, Harare Municipality, Chitungwiza Municipality, Epworth Local Board, Ruwa Local Board, Goromonzi Rural Council District and Mutare Municipality.

These municipalities were selected with considerations of mobile technology penetration, variations in levels of development and the diversity of cultural, ethnicity and socio-economic markers. Harare, Mutare and Chitungwiza are classified as urban municipalities with modern infrastructure, spatial planning and social amenities. Epworth and Ruwa are classified as peri-urban councils with a hybrid form of urban and rural development and infrastructure. Goromonzi is classified as a rural council, the main form of land use and economic activity in the area is agriculturally based. These local government authorities also provided a good sample size of women elected and appointed into local government, with more than 20 elected women councillors, at least 40 women councillors appointed through the gender quota and several serving and former woman Mayors.

The survey was administered using KoboToolbox (digital survey tool). Each respondent received information about the study and was asked to review a consent form before answering the survey questions. The survey was administered through an encrypted single-use link to maintain the anonymity of the respondent and to prevent duplicate



Figure 4: Map of Zimbabwe identifying locations where study was conducted

responses. The survey required the respondent to provide their full consent before commencing with the questionnaire. The survey questions were split into three categories: political campaigning and technology use; mobile phone applications and social media use; and impact of technology use on political life. A total of 76 local government leaders responded to the survey, they included men and women elected to local government council, women councillors elected through the gender quota, and men and women political candidates that participated in the 2023 local government elections but were not successful.

Key informant interviews: We conducted a total of 14 key informant interviews with two categories of respondents. First, we conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with elected women councillors. The women interviewed were selected purposefully from the survey pool. Women selected for KIIs had indicated in their survey responses that they were open to having a more in-depth interview with the researchers. Interview respondents signed consent forms and researchers sought permission for the interview to be recorded using an audio recorder/ Dictaphone. The interviews that were recorded were stored according to the data storage regulations of the Nordic Africa Institute (Uppsala University) and transcribed using Avid Note. Second, we conducted an additional 4 KIIs with representatives of civil society organisations and government officials. These interviews were confidential and were not recorded to maintain the safety of the respondents.

Review of laws and legal policy: we examined existing laws, legal policies and regulations currently in place in Zimbabwe that preside over cybersecurity, online safety, gender-based violence, sexual harassment and election offenses. In particular we focused on the Electoral Act [Chapter 2:13], the

Cyber and Data Protection Act [Chapter 12:07], the Domestic Violence Act [Chapter 5:16] and the Sexual Offences Act [Chapter 9:21].



Photo 1: Government offices of Ruwa Local Board, one of the local government authorities surveyed in this study.

These documents were sourced from the relevant website of the Government of Zimbabwe and from Veritas Zimbabwe (https://www.veritaszim.net/node) an independent legal repository that archives all Zimbabwean laws, amendments, bills under consideration at various stages of the legislative process. The above laws were reviewed with specific attention to how they can be applied or amended to criminalise and prosecute acts of online violence against women in politics. Particular attention was paid to how elements of the aforementioned laws could be applied in combination with the Electoral Act to ensure online safety for women in politics during election campaign periods.

Study limitations and ethical considerations

When this project was proposed, the intention was to host focus group discussions with men and women elected to local government and a second set of focus groups with representatives of civil society organisations and local government officials. However, the political environment and tensions prevailing in Zimbabwe during the data collection periods were not conducive for such research activities. Prospective participants did not feel safe to meet in groups to discuss matters relating to politics, elections and violence. There was also a heightened concern of state surveillance, as such participants were not willing to have virtual focus group discussions as an alternative.

In order to ensure the safety of participants and researchers the focus group discussions were cancelled. In the second phase of data collection, the project planned to host a cross-sectoral workshop to discuss the preliminary findings of the project and host group discussions on prevention and mitigation methods to address online violence. It was not possible to host this workshop due to security concerns.[6]

The project obtained ethical clearance for data collection from the Research and Ethics Board of Midlands State University (Zimbabwe) (Project L30526). Data related to this project is stored according to the Data Management regulations of the Nordic Africa Institute (Uppsala University). The main ethical considerations for this project were related to participant safety, anonymity (confidentiality), and informed consent. All participants received documentation detailing the nature of the project, names and contact details of researchers, and names of institutions funding/supporting the research. Participants were required to sign physical or digital informed consent forms, given the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any point and to decline answering questions they were uncomfortable with. Personal data was removed from all transcripts, and anonymity has been maintained in this report through the use of pseudonyms.

6 Between Feb -Aug 2026 The Government of Zimbabwe was overseeing the introduction of a constitutional amendment bill that sought to replace the direct popular election of the President with election by a joint sitting of Parliament, extend the terms of office of the President, Parliament and local authorities, enlarge the Senate and repeal the Zimbabwe Gender Commission, among other significant changes. Political tensions arose across the country due to the proposals within the bill. Opponents of the bill reported experiencing violence, intimidation and harassment. As a result, the political environment did not permit researchers to conduct all planned activities in a safe manner. Please see the following for more context: https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Constitution%20Amendment%20%28No%203%29%20Bill%202026.pdf and https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/6/19/zimbabwe-bill-to-scrap-presidential-elections-sparks-backlash

Findings

This section will detail the findings from the quantitative and qualitative data collection activities conducted in this project

Quantitative findings

The project administered surveys three categories of leaders: 1. men and women elected as local government councillors; 2. women elected to local government through the gender quota; 3. men and women that contested in the 2023 local government elections but were not successful. A total of 76 individuals responded to the survey. Of the leaders surveyed 79% were women, while the remaining 21% were men. Of the women, 47.4% were elected through direct ward seats (FPTP election), while the remaining 52,6% were elected through the gender quota system. The respondents represented 5 local government authorities in Zimbabwe from a mixture of urban, peri-urban and rural districts as displayed in the chart below:

As the project drew on intersectionality to guide the research methods, other key factors were also recorded in order to provide an intersectional analysis. These factors included gender, age, level of education, employment status and marriage status. The majority of the survey pool, 47.3% were between the ages of 41-50, 21% were under the age of 35, while 15.7% were between the ages of 36-40 and above the age of 50, respectively. Gender disaggregated data for the sample is available in Appendix 1.

Technology as a tool for political engagement

In terms of technology use, less than 2% of respondents reported not using any form of technology while they were campaigning – indicating the wide scale use of technology as a campaign tool for local politicians. The mobile phone messaging application WhatsApp was the most used form of technology, with 88% of respondents making use of it. While 40% of respondents made use of social media, many cited

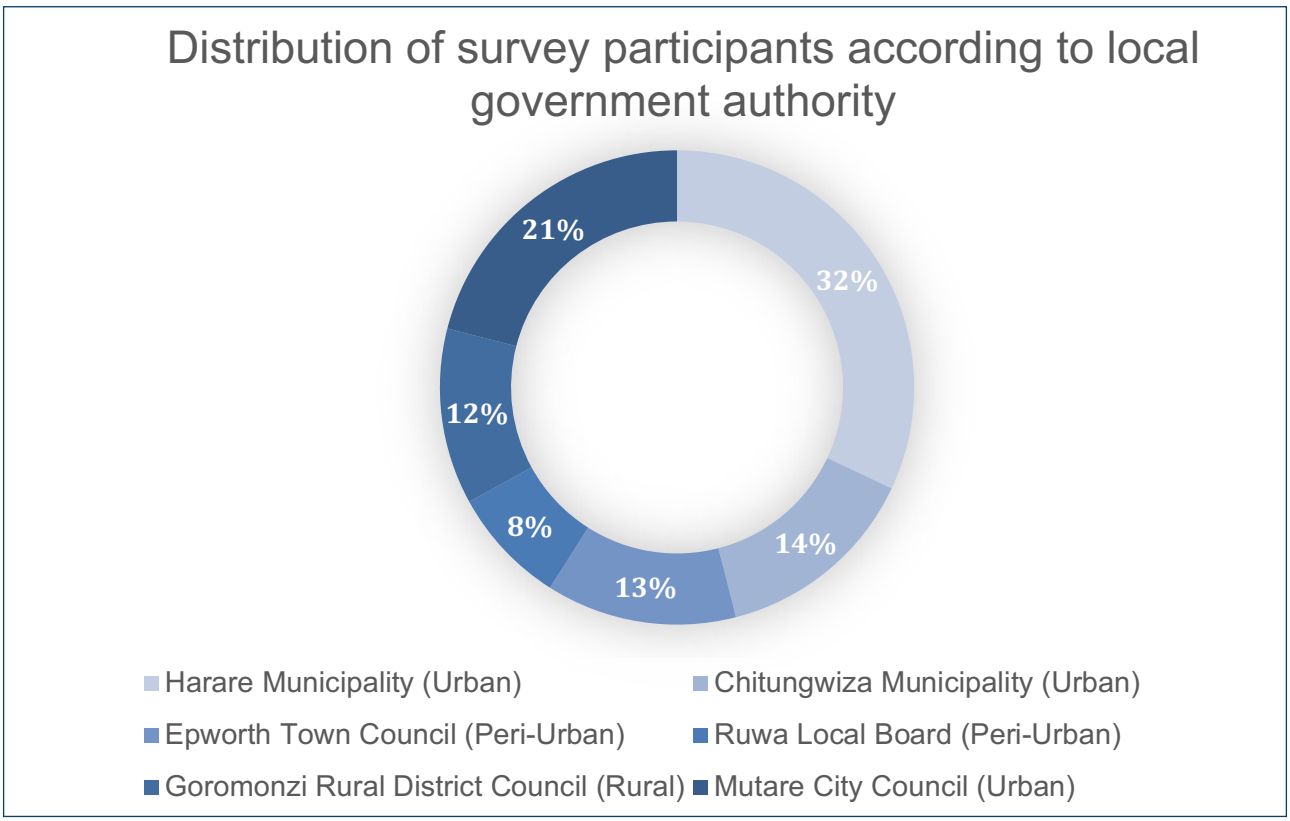


Figure 5: Distribution of survey participants according to local government authority

the high cost of mobile data as prohibitive, leading to lower usage. For those that made use of social media, Facebook was the most preferred platform at 59%, X was the second most preferred at 24% and while Instagram and TikTok emerged as the third most preferred social media platforms for 14% and 13 % of the survey respondents, respectively.

WhatsApp was the most used and most preferred application as it provides fast paced communication at a low cost. Aspiring leaders were able to create groups for their supporters, join community groups to access more voters and communicate with vast numbers of people in a short period of time. Leaders also shared that WhatsApp groups allowed them to coordinate community activities with more ease, communicate their campaign promises and share evidence of community development achievements. Groups also provide an open channel of communication for community members to report community issues/complaints. Leaders were able to quickly address urgent issues such as leaking water pipes or medicine shortages in the district maternity ward. Several respondents shared that WhatsApp groups also allowed them to access individuals outside Zimbabwe with families that still live or own property in their ward. Such individuals were more likely to donate to campaign funds and resources for community development. Notwithstanding the benefits that WhatsApp and social media platforms provided as campaign tools, these platforms also served as sites of violence and harassment.

Patterns of online violence and harassment on mobile phone applications and social media

Survey responses demonstrate that digital platforms are operating as sites for violence and harassment against both men and women in local politics in Zimbabwe. However, this violence and harassment is gendered, with a larger proportion of women reporting threats and harassment than male respondents.

With specific reference to WhatsApp 57% of the women indicated that WhatsApp was used to spread disinformation about them, in comparison to 16% reported by men. The bulk of the disinformation experienced by women candidates accused them of being prostitutes, trading sex for political positions, accusations of sexual promiscuity and infidelity. In comparison the disinformation spread about the male candidates accused them of being state security agents, agents of an opposing party or engaging in corruption. Respondents were asked if WhatsApp was ever used to harass or threaten their physical safety. Close to half, 43%, of women were threatened on WhatsApp and 38% received threats to their physical safety. In comparison, 8% of male respondents received threats to their physical safety on WhatsApp. A total of 46% of the women surveyed also received threats of physical harm on social media platforms, namely X and Facebook. More than 10 women that responded to the survey received direct death threats on WhatsApp. These messages explicitly stated, "we will kill you", "you will die soon", "step down or die" and "*unofira mahara*" which can be loosely translated to 'you will die for nothing'. Women also reported that threats were directed at their family members, including grandparents, children and spouses. A woman running against 6 men received anonymous threats that her home would be set on fire, or her family would be abducted if she did not step down. On two separate occasions the grandmother and uncle of a candidate were threatened and physically assaulted for protecting her from attempted abduction. It is important to note that these cases were not an anomaly, 36% of women that responded to the survey reported that threats that began online (WhatsApp and social media) had escalated to a physical attack.

Beyond threats of physical violence and intimidation, WhatsApp was also used to sexually harass political candidates. A total of 40% of the women that were surveyed reported experiencing online sexual harassment. In comparison only 1,3% of the men experienced sexual harassment. These figures point to the gendered nature of sexual violence in digital spaces and the normalisation of the sexual harassment of women. Women received WhatsApp messages containing rape threats, soliciting them for sex and referring to them with vulgar terms/names in English and Shona. This included terms such as 'bitch', 'whore', '*hure*' and '*hure revarume vese*' (every man's whore). In WhatsApp groups, women candidates were subjected

to humiliating attacks including body-shaming and accusations of prostitution or sexual promiscuity. Single women were also accused of having ambitions of seducing people's spouses. This last accusation was specifically targeted at younger candidates (18-30) as well as divorced and widowed women. Their single status was portrayed as a moral threat to the community and disqualified them from representing the community. As argued by Chigumadzi (2018), single women are cast as rebellious, dangerous, illegitimate and immoral in Zimbabwean politics. Sexual harassment and threats of sexual violence were amplified on social media platforms, specifically on X and Facebook. Respondents indicated that opponents would post sexually suggestive pictures of them online, inviting sexual harassment from the general public (anonymous X or Facebook users). These platforms were also used to share manipulated images of women candidates partially undressed or in the company of numerous men. In an extreme case, a respondent shared that online sexual harassment on X escalated to a physical attack where five men attempted to rape her.

WhatsApp groups were also used as pseudo-surveillance tools to track the movement of women candidates. Competing candidates could learn their opponents campaign plans, movements and schedules by infiltrating their campaign WhatsApp groups. As noted by one respondent, local politics is still male dominated and women running for council positions are seen as 'easy targets'. Male political opponents were able to use information covertly gathered through WhatsApp groups to sabotage women leaders, disrupting their campaign events and community engagements.

Impact of online violence: beyond the campaign

The trauma and impact of online violence extend beyond the political campaign season and often impacts the candidate and their family. Of the people surveyed 34% of women indicated that online disinformation had negatively impacted their family lives. Accusations of sexual infidelity and sexual promiscuity led to strained relationships with their spouse and in-laws. The children of women leaders were also subjected to harassment and ridicule. A single mother of three children shared how the community had accused her of prostitution and had begun labelling her children as the products of prostitution, leading her children to question their paternity. As women that venture into politics are portrayed as sexually promiscuous, their children are labelled as 'vana vemahure' (children of whores), loosely translated to 'the children of a whore'.

Online intimidation also negatively impacted the candidate's mental health, with 26% of women stating that online violence had resulted in mental health issues, and 31% expressed continuing to experience fear online after the election period. Women reported experiencing depression, low self-esteem, shame, loss of trust in friends and family and feeling ostracised. "I now see myself as a useless person," shared a candidate that had not been elected. "You get to know the lengths people can go to smear you, some who you considered friends and family…trust issues kick in" shared another. During the election a candidate shared that rumours and disinformation spread about her online resulted in her withdrawing from political activities and shutting herself indoors. She developed diabetes and high blood pressure from chronic stress and is still being treated for those conditions today. Online violence against women in politics has invisible consequences such as mental illness, trauma, fear and shame. These intangible repercussions linger on long after the election results are announced. Even those who are successfully elected carry the burden of this trauma; an elected councillor shared that she continued to think of the negative comments from WhatsApp groups and eventually sought out counselling to cope.

Qualitative findings

In addition to the surveys, we conducted key informant interviews with women councillors in the six local government authorities selected for this project. Below are three stories that demonstrate the nature and impact of online violence against women in local government politics in Zimbabwe. These stories display the pervasive nature of online violence, its impact on democratic processes, and limited options available for judicial recourse. The stories also demonstrate the compounding effects of online violence in the lives of women politicians. This violence threatens the physical safety of the political candidate and their families.

Pseudonyms have been used for the women councillors

Chipo's story

Chipo is a 25-year-old single woman that was successfully elected as a local ward councillor in 2023. This was her first election and she ran as the only woman in her ward.

Chipo received escalating online threats:

"Here in my local community, I was attacked because of the proposals that I was making within the council, which were mainly about strengthening local governance systems within my community to ensure that we run a good council that is transparent and responsive to the needs of the local people. Dealing with corruption and ending land grabs.

So, my message specifically was taken as a threat to the people that were in organized crime groups that were doing land grabs, especially land barons within my community.

There was an audio that I was made aware of that was sent circulating on my local WhatsApp groups, and it was picked by the media. I saw it on Twitter and all that, where these guys were threatening to harm me or kill me or do something very terrible to me because I was threatening their zones of power and influence.

And that threat that was spread via social media actually manifested into something bigger because I then survived at least three abductions in the same community. Following those threats my own uncle that I stay with here, was the one who was abducted. And unfortunately— fortunately he survived because he got good medical attention at the time.

Chipo's grandmother was then attacked:

"At another time my grandmother also was arrested sometime in— when these guys wanted to abduct me here at my place, my grandmother was there to defend me. So, they framed her to say she assaulted someone, she was then arrested and released. But she did not ever recover her health, and she ended up passing on."

Chipo sought out counselling from Counselling Services Unit to cope with her trauma. The CSU is a Medical Rehabilitation Centre for victims of Organized Violence and Torture (OVT) in Zimbabwe.

"the way they deliver their services, it's very, very compassionate and gender sensitive. You actually feel very, very safe."

Nokuthula's story

Nokuthula is 45 years old, she is married with children. She was elected as a local government councillor through the gender quota.

Nokuthula was targeted by online trolls:

"I remember 2 years back, it was our 20th wedding anniversary, and I posted on Twitter with my husband. We're going for dinner and posted thank you God for the 20 years of marriage, and my children. I hardly post stuff to do with my family, but, you know, once in a while I would. The responses that I ended up getting…people were saying does your husband know that you're such a bitch, does he know that you've got an affair with so-and-so? A whole lot of things that are not substantiated. It was always personal attacks, not about politics. I'll be trolled on social media to such a point that at times I wouldn't want to leave the house. I would lie in my bed, cover myself with the blankets, and just tremble. You know, just thinking about the effects of all the articles that were going around in my campaign, how I can't go out individually and explain myself and exonerate myself?"

Nokuthula has tried to report online harassment to the police:

"At one point I took screenshots, I went to the police. This is when they had just launched the cyber bullying law. I went, first spoke to the officers, they referred me to the officer in charge. I went to the officer in charge, I said I want to make a police report against so-and-so and so-and-so, they've written this and they've defamed my name. They said, okay, give us the details. Then I did an IRB. And then every week I was going 2, 3 times a week. What is the state of my case? And they said we don't know much about the law, it's still at Parliament level and it hasn't cascaded down to us. So, we really can't do anything right now."

Sandra's Story

Sandra is a 42-year-old married woman with children; she has been involved in politics for two decades. She was elected as a local government councillor in 2018 and in 2023

Sandra was sent threats via WhatsApp:

"I've had messages just sent to me from numbers I don't know. And they'll tell you, 'We're coming for you, we're going to burn your house.', 'We're going to kill you, watch out, we're going to—'. I think one that touched me the most was when someone just sent a message with pictures that said 'we know your daughter Grace is at Orange School, and your son Tom is also at Orange School, we are watching them. We know they play tennis at 2pm, so watch out!' And I had to take my kids out of public school and put them in home-schooling. So, they did 2 years of home-schooling. And it really affected them so much. My oldest daughter had to go back one year, to repeat one year of school to catch up as I now try to integrate them into normal school. So that really scared me the most"

Sandra chose not to report this to the police:

"No, I never reported it because I knew that it would expose my children and my family to more scrutiny. So, what I did is I just made sure that I tighten up my security, spoke with my husband, we made the decision, let's make sure we're monitoring the movements of the kids. Because the moment you report it then people will be assigned to the case, that kind of scrutiny is also not good"

Discussion

This discussion examines how women politicians in Zimbabwean local government experience online violence across different digital platforms. Guided by the first research question, the discussion explores the forms of abuse reported on WhatsApp, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter), and considers how these experiences extend beyond digital spaces to affect personal safety, family life, psychological wellbeing, and political participation. Rather than operating as neutral communication tools, digital platforms shape the forms, visibility, and consequences of violence directed at women in politics. The section also employs intersectionality as a conceptual framing to understand the how other factors beyond gender, such as age and marital status, intersect to inform the type of discrimination and attacks women are subjected to.

WhatsApp: Personalised harassment, rumours, and threats

The findings identify WhatsApp as the platform most frequently associated with everyday experiences of online violence against women in politics. Participants described it as an indispensable tool for campaigning, constituency engagement, and communication with supporters. At the same time, its integration into community life makes it a significant site of harassment, intimidation, and abuse. Unlike Facebook and X, where attacks often occur before large audiences, violence on WhatsApp commonly unfolds through neighbourhood groups, community forums, private messages, and circulated voice notes. Because these interactions often involve known community members, the abuse is experienced as highly personal and difficult to avoid.

Several participants explained that WhatsApp served as their primary channel for engaging voters and maintaining contact with political networks. However, the accessibility that makes the platform useful for political communication also creates opportunities for gendered hostility. Women reported that their legitimacy as leaders was frequently questioned through comments that linked political competence to age and gender. Participants recalled criticism suggesting that young women lacked the authority, experience, or capacity required for leadership positions. Such narratives demonstrate how women continue to face forms of scrutiny that are rarely directed at men occupying comparable offices.

A recurring pattern across interviews and survey responses was the use of sexualised attacks to undermine political credibility. Rather than engaging with women's political ideas, policy priorities, or performance in office, perpetrators frequently targeted their morality and sexuality. Women were accused of securing political appointments through sexual relationships, labelled as prostitutes, and portrayed as morally unfit for public leadership. Reflecting on these experiences, one participant observed that opponents repeatedly resorted to sexualised accusations because "they couldn't call me anything else besides that. They didn't have anything on me". Her reflection suggests that allegations of sexual impropriety functioned less as evidence-based critiques than as a readily available mechanism for discrediting women in politics.

Survey responses reinforce the prevalence of this pattern. Participants reported being accused of using their bodies to gain political advancement, engaging in inappropriate relationships with influential men, or obtaining positions through sexual favours. These allegations were often repeated across multiple digital spaces and circulated within local political networks. The persistence of such narratives highlights how women politicians are evaluated through gendered expectations of respectability that extend beyond their public roles and into their private lives.

WhatsApp community groups were also used as platforms to sexually harass women political candidates, exposing them to unwanted sexual attention and public shaming. A woman councillor shared that on several occasions her community WhatsApp groups would be flooded with images of her accompanied with sexual comments or veiled threats of sexual assault. "I am not a small woman, you know, so when I stand up my body parts are visible…So what they would do is on WhatsApp these trolls would take normal pictures of me from my Facebook, circle my body parts (breasts, hips or buttocks) and post me." The group

would then be filled with sexual comments, jokes and opinions about her appearance. As these attacks took place late at night, with the same image being shared simultaneously across groups, she was convinced that the attacks were coordinated. Beyond the sexual harassment, the attacks reduced the candidate's political campaign to debates about her appearance rather than her capacity to lead the ward.

WhatsApp also emerged as a significant channel for rumours, disinformation, and character assassination. Respondents described the circulation of false claims concerning their competence, political loyalties, residency status, and integrity. Some were portrayed as incapable of leading communities, while others were accused of serving rival political parties or acting on hidden interests. These narratives sought to weaken public confidence in women leaders and to discourage support for their political participation.

Importantly, many of these attacks originated within local communities. Participants explained that hostile discussions often occurred in community WhatsApp groups where individuals avoided direct references while making it clear who was being targeted. Such practices allowed harmful rumours to spread widely while limiting accountability. The use of indirect language, insinuation, and coded references enabled perpetrators to attack women's reputations without openly assuming responsibility for their statements.

Beyond reputational attacks, WhatsApp was also used to communicate explicit threats. Participants reported receiving messages warning that they would be killed, assaulted, or harmed if they continued their political activities. One respondent stated bluntly: "They threatened to kill me", while another recalled receiving messages warning, "We know all your hiding areas". Threats frequently extended to family members and included references to children, homes, and daily routines. Such messages communicated that women's political engagement would carry consequences extending beyond the electoral arena.

One of the most significant accounts involved a former mayor who became the target of threatening voice notes after challenging corruption and land-grabbing practices. According to her testimony, individuals who perceived her activities as a threat to their interests circulated messages promising violence. She emphasised that the threats did not remain confined to online spaces. Instead, they formed part of a broader campaign of intimidation that eventually manifested in physical attempts to harm her. As she explained, "it started online, but then it manifested physically". Her experience illustrates the close relationship between digital threats and offline violence and demonstrates how online harassment can become a precursor to physical attacks.

Participants also described the profound impact of threats directed at family members. One councillor recalled receiving messages that identified her children's schools and warned her to be cautious. The threat generated sufficient concern for her to remove her children from formal schooling for an extended period. Such examples demonstrate that online violence often targets women through their familial responsibilities and emotional ties, thereby increasing its coercive power.

Despite the frequency of abuse, reporting remained uncommon. Participants indicated that they were more likely to report threats involving possible physical violence than defamatory content or harassment. Difficulties in identifying perpetrators, combined with the widespread use of anonymous and false accounts, limited opportunities for accountability. The result is an environment in which many forms of online violence continue with little prospect of sanction. In an intriguing turn of events, an elected councillor shared that an individual that had trolled her on WhatsApp revealed his true identity to her and apologised for his actions. He shared that he was paid anonymously for sharing negative messages about her on WhatsApp. He described a process in which he would make a negative post, take a screenshot of the post, send it to an assigned number and then receive payment through mobile money (eco-cash). In his 'confession' he stated that he realised that she was an effective councillor, so he no longer felt comfortable attacking her. This example illustrates the coordinated nature of the attacks launched via WhatsApp. This reveals

the presence of local networks of misogyny that are willing to invest financial resources to maintain male dominance in local government politics by intimidating and harassing elected women in council.

The findings generally position WhatsApp as a central site of online violence against women in local politics. Through rumours, sexualised insults, disinformation, and threats, women politicians face sustained attempts to undermine their authority and discourage political participation. The platform's close connection to community life intensifies these harms because attacks emerge from networks that women must continue to navigate both politically and socially. An intersectional analysis of the violence and harassment transmitted through WhatsApp reveals key insights. WhatsApp was used as a conduit of semiotic, sexual and psychological violence against women in local politics. Young women (under 35), both elected and unelected were subjected to more frequent sexual attacks which included threats of rape, body shaming and malicious spreading of images. If their marital status was known, this did not seem to deter the attacks. Youth also acted as primer for attacks that focused on legitimacy and competence. Threats of physical violence and acts of physical violence did not seem to be targeted at any specific demographic of women, instead these threats and attacks seemed to be aimed at women that had a high potential to win the election or incumbent representatives.

Facebook and X: Public humiliation and reputational violence

While WhatsApp was associated with personalised harassment, Facebook and X were characterised by highly visible forms of abuse. Whilst these platforms are useful for political communication, public engagement, and narrative formation, they also expose women politicians to public scrutiny, ridicule, and coordinated attacks before broad audiences.

Participants described X as an important tool for political visibility. It enabled them to draw attention to community concerns, shape public conversations, and build political profiles. Yet this visibility came with high costs. Several participants characterised the platform as hostile and aggressive, noting that engagement frequently attracted harassment and abuse. One participant described X as "a brutal space" and acknowledged that she "wouldn't say I felt safe" using it. These comments illustrate the tension between the political opportunities afforded by social media and the risks associated with visibility in highly polarised online environments.

A prominent feature of violence on Facebook and X was public humiliation through attacks on women's personal lives. Participants described rumours and fabricated stories designed to discredit them through sexualised narratives. Survey data reveal similar experiences. Women reported false allegations concerning extramarital affairs, inappropriate relationships, and sexual misconduct. Many of these stories had direct consequences beyond the political sphere. One participant explained that fabricated allegations circulated online reached her husband and created severe tensions within her marriage. Another participant shared how an image of her leaving council chambers with male colleagues went viral on social media. The image ignited significant misinformation, as social media users quickly began speculating that she was having sexual affairs with her colleagues and labelling her as the mistress of the Mayor. This misinformation negatively impacted her marriage and her in-laws, who accused her of trying to humiliate their son (her husband). This illustrates how online disinformation can destabilise personal relationships while simultaneously damaging political credibility.

The findings further indicate that Facebook and X are frequently used to question women's suitability for leadership. Participants described narratives portraying women as inexperienced, incapable, or inherently unsuited to political office. Criticism often focused on age and gender rather than performance. Women reported that achievements were routinely reframed as evidence of inadequacy, while their successes attracted scrutiny rarely directed toward male counterparts. Social media functioned as a mechanism through which broader patriarchal assumptions about leadership were reproduced and amplified before large audiences.

The public visibility of Facebook and X enables disinformation to circulate rapidly and reach audiences far beyond local communities. Participants explained that rumours frequently moved across platforms, appearing first in local messaging groups before spreading through social media networks and online news outlets. In this way, individual attacks acquired wider reach and greater political impact. The interconnected nature of digital platforms increases the speed and scale with which hostile narratives can be disseminated.

A participant that was successfully elected shared how repeated insults on X caused her to withdraw from posting on X and Facebook. The attacks originated from a series of complaints on X that campaign posters were not cleared from her ward in a timely manner after the election. A popular entrepreneur on X quipped that the ward had become dirty after her election. He referred to her as a 'goat herder' who was going to turn their urban ward into a rural area. The label of 'goat herder' was repeatedly used in tweets and X-spaces. She lamented till today, if one looks up her name on social media tweets referring to her a 'goat herder' still appear prominently in the search. These labels and narratives, which are forms of semiotic resources, dehumanise women leaders and question their competence.

Participants also reported highly visible threats on these platforms. Messages warning women that they would be harmed, prevented from campaigning, or subjected to violence circulated openly online. Such threats serve multiple purposes. They intimidate individual women while simultaneously communicating to broader audiences that political participation may expose women to significant risk. Public threats contribute to a wider climate of exclusion by signalling the potential consequences of entering political life.

Several respondents described how online hostility translated into offline surveillance and intimidation. Experiences included being followed, monitored, threatened at public events, and subjected to attempts at physical harm. These incidents reinforce the argument that online abuse cannot be dismissed as symbolic or inconsequential. Rather, digital hostility creates conditions in which physical intimidation becomes more likely.

The visibility afforded by Facebook and X transforms individual attacks into public spectacles and extends the reach of gendered narratives. As a result, women politicians are required to defend both their political legitimacy and their personal integrity before diverse audiences. From these findings it is apparent that key features of women's personal lives predispose them to more frequent public attacks. More specifically, their appearance (body shape and complexion), age, marital status (single, widowed, or divorced), level of education and ethnicity. As violence and discrimination are not experienced in a uniform manner, taking note of these nuances enriches our understanding of how online violence manifests and provides the basis for more effective policy responses.

When online threats escalate: Physical and psychological consequences

The findings demonstrate that online VAWIP is not confined to digital environments. Instead, online and offline harms operate along a continuum in which threats communicated through digital platforms often generate material consequences for women's safety, well-being, and political participation.

The experiences of participants reveal how online threats can evolve into direct physical intimidation. The testimony of the former mayor discussed above provides a particularly striking example. After challenging powerful interests linked to corruption and land allocation, she became the target of threatening messages circulated online. These threats were followed by repeated attempts to abduct her. Community members and colleagues intervened on several occasions, preventing serious harm. Her observation that "it started from online, but then it manifested physically" highlights the porous boundaries between digital and offline violence and challenges assumptions that online threats remain confined to virtual spaces.

Violence frequently extended beyond individual politicians to include family members. Participants

reported threats directed at children, spouses, and relatives. In one case, a family member who had assisted a politician during an attempted abduction was subsequently targeted and subjected to severe abuse. Such incidents demonstrate that online VAWIP often operates through broader networks of intimidation. By threatening relatives and associates, perpetrators increase pressure on women to withdraw from political engagement.

Survey responses similarly documented threats involving death, assault, property destruction, and attacks on family members. Many messages contained specific details regarding residences, travel patterns, or children's schools, increasing their credibility and emotional impact. Participants interpreted these communications as genuine threats rather than expressions of online hostility alone. A woman councillor expressed significant fear and psychological trauma from repeated online threats, "I was trolled on social media to such a point that at times I wouldn't want to leave the house, you know. I would lie in my bed, cover myself with the blankets, and just tremble."

The psychological consequences were substantial – further showing the intersections between semiotic, sexual, and psychological forms of violence against women in politics. Women described persistent fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and hypervigilance. Several altered their routines, restricted their movements, or adopted additional security measures. The councillor who withdrew her children from school after receiving threats illustrates how online violence can reshape family life and everyday decision-making. The effects extended beyond immediate fear and produced long-term emotional and educational consequences for family members. Moreover, these findings also show the increased risks women in politics must contend with when they enter elective politics. In addition to their own safety, they must consider the safety of their children, spouse and extended family. They must also consider the cost that consistent online attacks will have on their reputation, their professional profile, their personal relationships with in-laws and community members. Men seldom have to make such considerations as the online attacks they receive seldom focus on their personal lives, appearance or sexual history.

An important finding concerns the normalisation of abuse. Some participants suggested that repeated exposure to harassment had altered their perceptions of what constitutes violence. Reflecting on her political experiences, one participant remarked that "the harassment, you don't see it as harassment, you see it as something that is supposed to happen." While this adaptation may reflect resilience, it also indicates the extent to which gendered violence has become embedded within political culture. The acceptance of harassment as a routine risk obscures its seriousness and reduces opportunities for intervention.

The emotional burden of persistent rumours, insults, and character attacks was also evident. Even in the absence of explicit threats, repeated allegations concerning morality, sexuality, and personal conduct generated stress, humiliation, and emotional exhaustion. Women were required continually to defend their reputations while simultaneously fulfilling political responsibilities. This additional labour represents a significant yet often overlooked consequence of online VAWIP. From an intersectional perspective, this burden was disproportionately carried by younger women who were unmarried, divorced or were single parents. This specific profile of women was specifically targeted with more online vitriol and hate speech of a sexual nature.

The findings further suggest that fear influences political behaviour. Participants reported avoiding certain spaces, limiting public engagements, and modifying campaign activities. In extreme cases, threats contributed to displacement and withdrawal from political activities. Online violence achieves more than reputational damage. It constrains participation by creating conditions of insecurity that limit women's freedom to engage fully in public life.

All in all, the findings challenge any distinction between online and offline violence that treats digital abuse as less serious or less harmful. The experiences documented here demonstrate that online threats can affect physical safety, mental health, family well-being,

educational outcomes, and political participation. Digital platforms are not merely spaces where violence is communicated. They are sites through which intimidation is organised, amplified, and enacted. As women are not a homogenous group, these findings also highlight the importance of applying an intersectional lens to studies on gendered violence, and VAWIP. A women's gender identity intersects with many other key features such as her age, class, employment status, marital status, ethnicity or cultural background – together these factors expose her to particular forms of online violence and influence how this violence impacts her political life. Understanding online VAWIP requires attention to the interconnected nature of digital and material harms and to the broader political structures that enable such violence to persist. The experiences of women in local politics detailed in this report unmask the insidious nature of online violence and the complex local networks that enable it. The women's testimonies expose patterns of harassment, abuse, intimidation and humiliation that cause both tangible and intangible harms, violate individual rights and undermine democracy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this report has demonstrated that online violence against women in politics has become a pervasive feature of women's political participation in Zimbabwean local government. While digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and X provide important opportunities for political communication, visibility, and citizen engagement, they simultaneously function as sites through which women politicians are subjected to sexual harassment, hate speech, disinformation, public humiliation, and threats of violence.

The findings illustrate important differences in how violence manifests across platforms. WhatsApp was primarily associated with personalised harassment, rumours, and direct threats emerging from local social networks, whereas Facebook and X facilitated highly visible forms of reputational violence and public humiliation. Across all platforms, sexualised narratives and attacks on women's morality were routinely deployed to undermine political legitimacy and reinforce patriarchal assumptions about leadership.

The report further shows that the boundaries between online and offline violence are porous. Digital threats frequently extend beyond virtual spaces, producing tangible consequences for women's physical safety, psychological well-being, family relationships, and political participation. In some cases, online intimidation escalated into offline surveillance, attempted physical attacks, and the targeting of family members. These experiences challenge any understanding of online abuse as merely symbolic or inconsequential.

A particularly concerning finding is the normalisation of harassment within political life. Repeated exposure to abuse has led some women to regard violence as an inevitable aspect of political participation. Such normalisation risks entrenching exclusionary political cultures and may discourage both current and future generations of women from seeking political office.

We contend that addressing online violence against women in local politics requires interventions that extend beyond individual coping strategies. Sustainable change will depend on strengthened institutional responses, greater accountability from political actors and digital platforms, enhanced support systems for women politicians, and broader efforts to transform the gendered norms that continue to shape political participation. Laws and regulations that address online safety, gender-based violence and election offenses should be adapted and enforced to hold perpetrators of online violence accountable. The absence of clear pathways for legal redress for victims of online violence has bred an environment of impunity. Governments must take the steps to ensure legal reforms that formally recognise online violence against women as a legitimate threat to democratic freedom. Creating safer digital and political environments is essential not only for protecting women politicians but also for deepening democratic participation and ensuring more inclusive local governance.

Recommendations

Drawing on the analyses in this report, we make the following recommendations.

1. Strengthen legal and institutional responses to online violence against women in politics

Existing legal and institutional mechanisms should be strengthened to recognise and address online VAWIP explicitly. Electoral bodies, law enforcement agencies, and local government institutions require clear protocols for documenting, investigating, and responding to threats and harassment directed at women politicians. Specialised reporting mechanisms should be established to ensure that complaints involving digital abuse are addressed promptly and effectively.

In Zimbabwe this would require enforcing Part II (Section 164, 164 A-G) of the Cyber and Data Protection Act that provides guidance and sanctions for offences relating to electronic communications and materials. The Act stipulates sanctions (fines and prison sentences) for the transmission of data messages inciting violence, sending threatening data messages, cyberbullying and harassment, transmitting false data messages intending to cause harm and transmission of intimate images without consent. All of these offenses target specific acts of online violence that have been reported by women who participated in this study. The police, national prosecutors, and judges should be educated and equipped to accept reports, investigate, charge and prosecute perpetrators of these offenses. However, effective enforcement will remain difficult where women are reluctant to report online violence and where police, prosecutorial and judicial institutions lack the institutional will, resources, specialised expertise and capacity required to respond to such cases, creating a gap between the legal protections available on paper and their practical enforcement. Secondly, Parts XIX, XX and XXI of the Electoral Act which focus on election offenses and elements of undue influence, electoral malpractice and corruption should be amended to explicitly include digital offenses within the defined offenses in the act. Expanded definitions would allow the electoral court to prosecute election related online violence as an election offense.

2. Develop digital safety and security programmes for women politicians

Women politicians should receive regular training in digital security, online risk management, and strategies for responding to cyber harassment. Such programmes should include guidance on protecting personal information, documenting online abuse, securing social media accounts, and accessing psychosocial and legal support when threats occur. Training should also address harassment by anonymous or pseudonymous users, including how to preserve usernames, profile links, screenshots, timestamps, message metadata and other digital evidence that may assist platforms or law-enforcement agencies in identifying perpetrators. Where the identity of an anonymous user cannot be established immediately, women politicians should be equipped to report abusive accounts and content to social media platforms, request the preservation of relevant data where appropriate, and pursue available legal remedies while avoiding direct engagement that could escalate the abuse.

At present organisations such as the Women's Academy for Leadership and Political (WALPE), Women in Politics Support Unit (WiPSU), Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) and Padare offer such training programs and support for women in politics. They receive support from donor agencies, donor embassies, UN Women and the Zimbabwe Gender Commission. However, funding for such activities is often short-term and linked to elections.

3. Political parties should adopt and enforce zero-tolerance policies

Political parties have an important role in shaping political culture. Parties should adopt and implement clear codes of conduct that prohibit online harassment, disinformation campaigns, and gender-based attacks by party members and supporters. Internal disciplinary mechanisms should

be strengthened to hold perpetrators accountable and to create safer political environments for women.

At present the largest political parties in Zimbabwe do not have a publicly available codes of conduct or regulations that focuses on gender-related violence, sexual harassment or gender discrimination within their institutions.

4. Enhance collaboration with social media platforms

Social media companies should work more closely with electoral bodies, civil society organisations, and women politicians to improve the identification and removal of harmful content. Reporting procedures for threats, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and gender-based abuse should be simplified and made more responsive to the needs of women in politics.

Women in politics, in particular, should be encouraged to collect evidence of online violence when it occurs. This would compel social media companies to act more decisively against repeat offenders and accounts that promote online violence against women in politics.

5. Support women politicians through peer networks and psychosocial services

Considering the significant emotional and psychological effects documented in this study, support systems for women politicians should be strengthened. Peer support networks, counselling services, and mentoring initiatives can help women navigate hostile digital environments while reducing the isolation frequently associated with online abuse.

Women's organisations, government and political parties should amplify awareness about the psyche-social resources and services available for women in Zimbabwe, such as the Counselling Services Unit. The CSU is a non-partisan Medical Rehabilitation Centre for victims of Organized Violence and Torture (OVT) in Zimbabwe. Women should be encouraged to seek out counselling services and other mental health resources.

6. Promote civic education on gender and political participation

Long-term efforts to address online VAWIP require broader societal transformation. Civic education initiatives aimed at challenging patriarchal norms, promoting gender equality, and fostering respectful political engagement should be implemented at the community level in institutions such as schools, churches, community centres, universities and other community-based institutions. Campaigns with positive gender messages can also be transmitted on radio, television, streaming services and print media. Such interventions may contribute to reducing the social acceptance and normalisation of violence against women in politics.

Governments should lead such efforts, the responsibility to shift negative gender norms cannot be left for civil society organisations to steer alone. Government institutions such as the Zimbabwe Gender Commission are vital in this regard, as they have a clear national mandate to increase gender equality and address gender discrimination. The ZGC should receive increased institutional and financial support to lead culturally-sensitive awareness campaigns that can shift norms and practices in order to encourage gender equality, inclusive governance and equal societies.

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